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Advancing School Improvement *in SEAs* through Research Practice Partnerships

THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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BACKGROUND

States have a moral and economic responsibility to enable continuous, sustained improvement processes that include differentiated support to districts and schools—particularly those that are the lowest performing and have the widest achievement gaps. Research practice partnerships (RPPs) can aid SEAs in examining their statewide systems of support to schools and districts.

To that end, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released [Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems](#) on June 21, 2017. These principles call out the importance of designing and executing high-quality school improvement plans informed by research, evidence, and the science of learning development. Furthermore, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states and districts to choose evidence-based programs and interventions to drive school improvement and many State Education Agencies (SEAs) are committed to adopting continuous improvement approaches. ESSA also provides states and their districts with more autonomy to determine how they will improve low-performing schools. With that new autonomy, however, comes responsibility and accountability for ensuring local education agencies (LEAs) and schools implement evidence-based approaches that are tied to local needs and demonstrate impact. Research practice partnerships offer SEAs an avenue for researching questions and developing strategies to offer Title I 7% school improvement funds to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and schools that meet the evidence tiers outlined in ESSA for school improvement plans.

RPPs can augment funding and capacity to support states in conducting the research necessary for adopting a truly evidence-based, learning approach to school improvement, and become true learning organizations. If these partnerships are well-constructed, they can simultaneously build the SEAs' "muscle" to do more of this kind of work on their own.

WHAT ARE RPPS AND WHAT VALUE CAN THEY BRING TO AN SEA?

Research practice partnerships (RPPs) are research collaborations between educational researchers and practitioners. RPPs bring researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders together in long-term, cooperative relationships to examine and address educational problems (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). RPPs can offer SEAs a strategy for producing relevant research to guide decision making and planning aligned with school improvement plans. Long-term partnerships provide both the SEA and the research organization the ability to establish trust, take on large research questions, and see research projects through to fruition.

Under The Comprehensive Centers Program there are fifteen regional centers that assist state educational agencies (SEAs) by providing training and technical assistance to support effective implementation and administration of programs under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

There are three types of longer-term RPPs that SEAs can consider:

1. Research Alliances – arrangements between a state/district/school and an independent research organization focused on investigating questions of policy and practice that are central to the state/district/school.
2. Design Research – a form of educational research, similar to engineering research, where solutions are built and studied at the same time in real world contexts.
3. Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) – groups engaged in collective pursuits to improve a capability, such as that of schools to provide effective teaching and learning opportunities for students.

Research partners assist SEAs in developing questions and creating research agendas and projects. This support is invaluable for SEAs that are focused on using evidence as a part of a continuous improvement process. Research practice partnerships differ from formal program evaluations in that they represent a longer-term commitment to the state, where program evaluators are typically more short-term.

Research partners who can help build research capacity at SEAs might include:

- Regional Education Labs (RELs) - research alliances with SEAs and LEAs to research relevant education topics.
- Capacity building partnerships - funded research institutions embed data analysts in sponsored LEAs or SEAs to work alongside staff cleaning and analyzing data. The sponsoring institution may also be authorized to use the data for longer-term research.
- Academic researchers - enter into memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with SEAs or LEAs and other agencies to access the data for long-term, sophisticated causal analysis or evaluations often funded by research grants from foundations and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Education agencies may be named as partners on the grant proposals.
- Research consortia – funded groups of researchers and local universities or think tanks working directly with SEAs or LEAs to frame questions, prepare and analyze data, and disseminate and implement findings.

Participating in RPPs is mutually beneficial to the researcher and SEA; researchers gain access to practitioners’ experiences and firsthand knowledge and learn how to communicate effectively with non-academic audiences, while practitioners are able to hone their research skills and ability to conduct or interpret complex findings.

One of the main reasons for facilitating this type of partnership is to increase the use of evidence in practice. Studies have shown

Successful research partnerships are co-constructed and co-developed between researchers and practitioners from the start.

Researchers and practitioners must work to develop a joint commitment that is intentional and formal acknowledging that there is important expertise contained within each party and plan to work collaboratively long-term.

that practitioners often do not use “generic” research published in academic journals for various reasons (e.g., it’s not accessible, it’s too long, it’s hard to understand, or it’s not relevant). Working in a partnership allows practitioners to have a researcher they know and trust to contact at any time and are thus more likely to use evidence to inform decision-making.

Research practice partners can help SEAs specifically with school improvement efforts. For example, through RPPs states can:

- Examine the impact of state supports and interventions in low-performing schools
- Conduct rigorous research on new and innovative school improvement approaches to build an evidence base for use in other schools across the state
- Synthesize research on a topic that LEAs and schools across the state are struggling to address

Research practice partnerships can also provide options for additional funding for research projects. Funding for RPPs can come from government sources, public or private programs, national foundations, or regional or local funders. The William T. Grant Foundation offers advice for RPPs on [acquiring funding](#) for their work.

HOW HAVE STATES LEVERAGED RESEARCH PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS AT THE SEA LEVEL?

MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has built an internal research agenda and team over time while utilizing academic research partnerships to guide school improvement work. Ten years ago, the research team at ESE began with one person, Carrie Conaway. Her background in research and policy and her senior position allowed her to see across the entire agency to ask questions and conduct research that mattered most. In 2007, ESE partnered with academic researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) at Harvard University to examine the impact of the state’s charter schools on student outcomes. Since then, the agency has developed a wide range of partnerships with various scopes of work.

The most significant outcomes of establishing research partnerships in Massachusetts include improving state data systems and policies; hosting conferences on leveraging research to improve K-12 education policy; and generating research findings that are relevant for policy-making. SEAs are also able to attach their learning agenda to the agency’s strategic plan, allowing the agency to leverage a valuable resource – their data – to encourage competition for partnership opportunities that will be well-aligned with the state’s research agenda. In 2017, Massachusetts identified the following priorities for their [research agenda](#).

If a state is just starting out, Conaway recommends they “start small and demonstrate the value of the work that you are doing.” By repurposing staff with related work and moving positions from other areas, the internal ESE research team grew over time into a full planning and implementation unit. Building an internal team supplements the work that an SEA is able to accomplish in conjunction with a research partner. Teams with clear objectives can guide the work and keep the research agenda on track toward findings that improve school improvement efforts and better outcomes for students. SEAs should begin with a clear research agenda and focus on finding research partners willing to help answer the questions within that agenda.

Communication is a key component of what makes a research partnership successful. In order to get the most out of partnerships both parties must brief one another and share findings along the way. University-based researchers have the ability to conduct and design high-quality rigorous research, and they are often viewed as more independent than internal research teams. While they are committed to help contribute positively to state education agency work, they must understand what the SEA hopes to accomplish in order to match their work with the state’s learning agenda. It is important for states to set and maintain clear expectations for timelines, results, presentation of findings, and roles and responsibilities. In Massachusetts, feedback loops provide routines and structures for sharing findings with agency staff and leadership internally, but it’s the Research Coordinator that plays the integral role of keeping communication lines open between the agency and its research partners.

A positive consequence of working with external research partners is the ability to grow an internal research team. Conaway’s recommendations for leveraging research partners to grow an internal research team within an SEA include the following:

- Begin by demonstrating the need to address a problem
- Move people from across the SEA positioned to do this work onto the research team
- Build out a planning and implementation unit
- Be creative in funding uses

Massachusetts’ Research Agenda

1. *High school turnaround.* What strategies are likely to successfully turnaround low-performing high schools? Which strategies implemented in Massachusetts result in positive outcomes?
2. *State accountability and support system.* What strategies have the Holyoke, Lawrence, and Southbridge Public Schools implemented as part of their receiverships? Have they been implemented well? What impact have they had on student, educator, and other outcomes? In general, what assistance, supports, and strategies help districts turn around?
3. *Strategies for turnaround in districts without autonomies.* What impact does extending turnaround-like autonomies to low-performing Level 3 schools via a grant program have on district practices and student outcomes?

Conway states "...far more important than defining the research question, methodology, or deliverables is building the personal relationships that keep the work moving forward and help weather the rough patches that inevitably come up."

TENNESSEE

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) has long been committed to using high-quality research to inform education policy and practice with a focus on continual improvement. For the past five years, under the leadership of Nathaniel Schwartz and Laura Booker, Tennessee has been taking cues from Massachusetts to establish an internal research team that partners externally to drive a research agenda within the agency.

Through its work with the [Tennessee Education Research Alliance \(TERA\)](#), launched in 2016, the state has developed a clear agenda focused on the cross-section of policy and school improvement objectives.

"Its research agenda is determined by a joint steering committee representing Peabody College and the Tennessee Department of Education. Specific research questions are informed by members of a broad-based Advisory Committee representing Tennessee education groups and stakeholders."

Based on that input, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance has prioritized four areas of focus:

- Improving early reading
- Reimagining state support for professional learning
- Driving improvement in low-performing schools
- Strengthening Tennessee's education labor market

Among the related topics the Tennessee Education Research Alliance is studying:

- The various instructional supports in place in different state and district turnaround efforts across Tennessee, including the Achievement School District (ASD) and district-managed Innovation Zones (iZones)
- Student and staff mobility within low-performing schools
- The characteristics of educators who succeed in the most challenging schools, and effective strategies to recruit and retain them

TERA also supported TDOE in conducting an annual survey of all teachers and administrators in the state. These surveys have provided TDOE with data that allows the state to monitor changes in educator perceptions over time, among other items. TDOE also leverages their external partnership work to analyze the extent to which department initiatives reach their desired

audience. External partners often have more capacity for qualitative work and offer state programs options for low-cost longitudinal studies.

Tennessee learned that in order to make a research partnership worthwhile and mutually beneficial, it is imperative to have an internal team that looks across external research projects so that strands of work or issues are being looked holistically. The team at TDOE does landscape analysis to ensure that all parties remain apprised of the implementation process. Research partners are expected to focus on long term, strategic issues and maintain projects even with in-house turnover.

By providing a single team with oversight over the research agenda, the process of finding research partners focused on carrying out analysis aligned with the state's needs becomes easier. It is important to ensure that external partners are prepared to engage in research that is relevant to agency work. TDOE strives to strike a balance between quick turnaround work and longer-term evaluations by assigning external research partners long-term questions.

OREGON

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) works within the Regional Education Lab (REL) system and partners with REL Northwest on a variety of research projects. The partnership supports ODE in managing their network of leadership coaches, monitoring school improvement routines, monitoring individual school progress, and differentiating support provided to schools in a systematic fashion. ODE's laser-like focus on improving outcomes for students by strategically utilizing research to inform practice not only guides their work across the agency, but also in their partnerships with researchers.

In 2007 ODE and REL Northwest partnered to study high school graduation rates, and used the information gathered about how states were collecting data and using indicators to inform the development of the state's on-track indicator¹.

Through its research practice partnership, the state was also able to use findings to identify partnerships across districts and states that would allow them to engage on a larger scale to build an effective early warning system. ODE carefully considered which LEAs and schools would benefit from the most support and how to maximize that support. The creation of the on-track indicator is an example of how the state leveraged their research partnership to answer an important question.

Through their partnership work, ODE learned that both districts and schools need to be involved simultaneously in the research agenda to establish trust and gain support rather than falling into compliance routines. Since reporting data is limited, the SEA works continuously to find ways

1 In 2012, the Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB) adopted the Freshman On-Track (FOT) indicator based on research findings. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) has been reporting a FOT indicator on school and district annual report cards ever since. Currently, to be considered on-track, a first year student must be enrolled on the first school day in May with full academic year status (denominator) and have earned 25% of the credits required to graduate (a minimum of 6 credits) prior to the start of the next school year (numerator).

incorporate local context to determine what type of support will be most beneficial to a particular school. Oregon’s research partners helped the state review data on implementation practices, setting the state up to continuously adjust their support based on the success of interventions along the way.

CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES A RESEARCH PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP SUCCESSFUL IN BUILDING SEA CAPACITY?

Research practice partnerships must be aligned with an SEA’s priorities and structured to support the development and execution of a shared research agenda that reflect the agency’s priorities. The agency should designate a single team that can see across the entire agency’s work and focus on research internally. Designing high-quality school improvement plans and adopting continuous improvement approaches are dependent on asking and answering research questions aligned with the agency’s goals.

States should carefully consider the structure of partnerships and related staffing needs in order to develop a successful partnership. Research projects must include a shared commitment to a research agenda, and research evidence must be available for strategic use in addressing problems. Successful partnerships are achieved when there is a commitment to ongoing communication, when projects are fully funded, and when shared commitments are established in advance of the work.

When states partner with researchers to improve student outcomes, the gaps that currently exist between research and decision-making are reduced, because research agendas become aligned with the needs of students. Continuous improvement is contingent on regular evaluation of questions and outcomes, making RPPs an invaluable option for SEAs.

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